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BLACKFACE NATION. RACE, REFORM, AND IDENTITY IN AMERICAN POPULAR MUSIC, 1812-1925.

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In 2001 several all-white fraternities in American colleges and universities decided to throw a series of blackface parties. White male students wearing masks depicted black subjects, posing in stereotypical attitudes. The controversy and polemics that followed serve Brian Roberts to explore the issues of race in the making of both white and black American identities or, more specifically, how nineteenth-century cultural expressions informed the contemporary "confusion of white fantasy with black expression" (290).

Roberts identifies popular music as a privileged space for the deployment of culture, acting as well as a key media source for the period the work covers—from 1812, the beginning of the Anglo-American War, to 1925, the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance. This period ranges from the antecedents –such as English ballads, Irish jigs or patriotic war songs– to the successors –folk, jazz or blues– of blackface minstrels and abolitionist hymns, the principal objects the book focuses on. Its central argument problematizes two common assumptions regarding the two main musical genres of the period: the association of blackface minstrelsy with the traditional, popular values of America's lower classes and, conversely, the equation of The Hutchinson Family's abolitionist songs with elitist, highbrow ideas of the emerging middle classes. Furthermore, the book points to the challenge of a teleological and linear notion of the roots of American popular culture. Instead, popular culture is understood as a contested site where conflicting ideals were at stake. In doing so,

Roberts resituates reformist abolitionism at the core of mainstream America.

Blackface Nation follows a thematic rather than a chronological structure. The first two chapters are dedicated to the role of the popular and the vulgar in the making of a national American culture. By studying the reproduction and circulation of ballads, songs, and anthems, Roberts focuses on the intersection of tradition and modernity in the lyrics and musicality of early popular music in the United States. The materials offered range from dances in the colonial era to military recruitment songs in the context of the War of 1812. Many of them reproduced obscene tones and celebratory attitudes that, although condemned by political and religious hegemonic values, were periodically brought out into the cultural surface as a kind of Freudian "repressed" (28). This communal background worked alongside republican ideals, rendering the traditional carnivalesque as a constitutive element of American patriotism.

Chapters 3 and 6 trace the origins of blackface minstrelsy as one of the first distinctively American forms of popular music and of racial identification. The underlying social context of the emergence of the genre was the anxiety felt by white male artisan laborers. They witnessed an industrial revolution that was replacing their traditional craftmanship with factory labor, thus threatening to harm their social status vis-a-vis blacks, migrants and women, the competing workforce at the time. This inspired a pursuit to uphold former hierarchies through culture using the means of expressive media such as theater. The figures of Jim Crow and Zip Coon fulfilled this task, creating a "theatrics of remasculinization" that excluded women and blacks from the stage and the audience (92). Here the book is able to tie up with academic endeavors of black feminism, such as Kimberle Crenshaw's (1989), by pointing to the intersection of gender with the roots of the making of race. The communality in the case of minstrels, Roberts argues, was forged by identifying what a proper black freedman ought to look like before the eyes of a white man: poor, uneducated, and happy.

In the light of this history, Roberts reminds us that skepticism should be in order when we face claims of racial authenticity in the present. Racial stereotypes are embedded in cultural forms, such as minstrelsy, that, far from offering room for black expression, encapsulate racial hierarchies under a logic of "black exoticism" (290). This minstrel gaze, according to Roberts, survived the

blackface plays, becoming a key component of blackness in American popular culture, a representation that is marked by a sense of white superiority and an obsession for the wild and dangerous rationalized through "a racial hierarchy built on love" (295). The idea of love is key to Roberts's arguing of American racism. Love, or a fantasized and pervasive mystification of the racial other, constructed a black ideal of behavior that had more to do with white imagination than with reality. Racist violence is explained as a hatred crime but also as a "love crime" (158). Since whites' love was not towards actual blacks but towards stereotyped blacks, "whenever actual African Americans did not adhere to white fantasies of blackness the love could turn to violence" (328). Loving black folks in minstrels meant loving an image of blackness related to the satisfaction of desires and the lack of social responsibility, attributes that would become key elements of the consumerist culture in American capitalism.

A further reflection on the interplay between hate and love is to be found in chapters 4 and 9, which explore work, parlor, and slave songs in order to destabilize the fixed structures of whiteness and blackness. The emergence of those songs reflected the "contacts and exchanges" among genres and peoples both home and abroad (104). Univocal ascriptions of slave songs as the quintessential black songs, alongside equations of middle-class culture with whites, owe more to a retrospective reproduction of race relations than to a thorough account of the origins and contexts surrounding those popular artifacts. The intermixture of white and black musical cultures raises questions of agency, since black subjects saw themselves trapped between submission to external stereotypes and a resistance condemned to cultural marginality. The example of The Jubilee Singers, following Roberts's claim, constituted a middle path of black performers who, by means of the resources of mainstream minstrels, were capable of voicing subaltern notions of blackness. However, more attention could have been paid to the labor of cultural reappropriation employed by this and other black minstrel groups, such as McAdoo's company in the U.S. and South Africa analyzed by Chinua Akimaro (2014).

A counterpart to blackface minstrels was represented by abolitionist songs and anthems. Their origins and themes are studied by Roberts in chapters 5 and 7, and their cultural clash with pro-slavery views is detailed in chapter 8. Roberts argues, provocatively, that The Hutchinson Family represents a middle-class

communalism attesting that "communism is a deeply rooted American tradition" (280). During the 1840s the Hutchinsons carried out a series of successful tours through the theaters and concert houses of Northeastern America, a place shaking with reformist movements, religious awakenings, and utopian settlement projects. The family's hymns consisted of reuses of traditional songs and new compositions that touched upon their moral communitarianism. All this converged into a "domesticated communism" of middle-class audiences committed to the emancipation of slaves and the virtuous uplift of the republic (206). The book, therefore, works within the broader field of communitarian utopianism in the American 19th century, represented by scholars such as Richard Francis (1997). However, Roberts goes beyond that academic realm by connecting utopianism to the making of American popular culture.

Roberts could have made use of a more critical approach in regard to the outcomes of middle-class reformism. Progressivism, and its related ideas of uplifting society through technology and science, were consubstantial to the shaping of what Patrick Wolfe termed racial "regimes of difference" (2001). Promoters of social reform in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were as much concerned with the degraded conditions of industrialization and capitalism as they were with population control and the dangers posed by lower classes. The Hutchinsons' hit "Get off the truck!" referred to progress as an inescapable force that was irremediably destined to bring about emancipation, but that same progress was meant to embrace the politics of segregation, eugenics, and immigration restriction later on. A second weak point in Roberts' view of the abolitionist scene is the role of American Indians. The parlor Indian songs were pioneering in their rejection of the forced removal and exterminatory policies of the era, but their humanitarian rhetoric rested upon notions of the indigenous circumscribed to the beauty, simplicity, and purity of a people antithetical to modernity. This discourse of the noble race mirrored that of the passing race. The features used to depict Indians inscribed them into a European view only concerned with natives' vanishing past, not with perspectives for a collective future. In turn, indigenous dispossession was rationalized as a natural catastrophe and not as a result of political decisions. Further reference to a vast amount of scholarship on this white representation of the Indian, initiated in Leslie Fiedler's seminal work (1968), is missing. Notwithstanding these flaws, *Blackface Nation* offers an insightful

contribution to the field of popular culture and black studies, providing an astonishing amount of musical sources throughout time and genres. These sources lead readers to question contemporary assumptions on the fixity and immobility with which cultural and racial formations are conceptualized and categorized, resituating some of the most well-known American popular music as products of historically emergent processes.

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